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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005973

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SUBJECT: THAILAND COUP: SONTHI ASKS SURAYUD TO BE INTERIM  
PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) I called on retired General and Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont at the Privy Council Chambers on September 28. Surayud began by apologizing for telling me on the night of the coup that he did not know of anything going on that night. He maintains that when we spoke, he was on his way home from a palace religious ceremony--attended by Privy Council head Prem--for the Queen's late mother. After returning home, he had turned on the TV and saw Thaksin's attempt to declare emergency rule and fire Army Chief Sonthi. At that point, Prem called and instructed him to "come to the palace."

¶2. (C) Turning to the current state of affairs, Surayud explained that on the evening of September 27, General Sonthi Boonyaratklin had come to his residence and asked him to be the interim Prime Minister. Surayud responded that he didn't really want the post, but if the King approved it, he obviously would take the position. I responded to this by saying that "you and I both know what will happen;" Surayud will take the job. We shared a laugh over the frustrating nature of the position: a difficult job for 8-10 months that angers many people and then you get kicked out.

¶3. (C) Surayud reiterated the common assertion by many Thai that the coup was "the only way out." Thai politics were at "a total stalemate." Surayud hopes that the coup, in hindsight, will be seen as one step back, but two steps forward for Thai democracy. I told Surayud that he is the right person for the job in this difficult situation. As PM, he will make it possible for the Council for National Security (CNS, the CDRM's new name under the pending interim constitution) to step back and permit the interim civilian government to have more authority and leeway to pave the way towards the restoration of an elected government. If a civilian technocrat such as banker Pridyathorn or UNCTAD Chief Supachai had been selected, that may have sent a better initial signal to foreign observers, but would not have inspired the CNS to take a more hands-off role.

¶4. (C) I added that most people felt that it would be defensible for the CNS to retain certain, circumscribed powers, allowing them to guard against a counter-coup or to improve security in the troubled South. However, several articles in the draft interim constitution that we have seen

allow the CNS to have final say in the selection of ministers and drafters for the new constitution. Moreover, the clause preventing members of the interim parliament and constitutional commission from running for office in the next two years had reportedly been dropped. These problematic elements, frankly, run counter to otherwise positive signs that GEN Sonthi intends to make good on his pledge to "get out" of politics. Surayud agreed, adding that he had argued that the CNS should step back as much as possible. According to Surayud, Sonthi does not want political power.

15. (C) Turning to the public reaction to Surayud's new role, I explained that some are likely to criticize the selection of a former Army Chief as Prime Minister. Others may criticize the selection of a sitting Privy Councilor as an indication that the King is calling the shots. Surayud responded by noting that a retired military officer is a civilian, adding, "I challenge anyone to look at my military record and find problems with it."

16. (C) I reviewed the USG response to the coup, including our strong public criticism. Surayud said he understood perfectly. I explained that Washington was examining a suspension of assistance under Section 508. Surayud acknowledged this, saying it was "just like in 1991." Surayud explained that the interim constitution is scheduled for release by Royal Proclamation on September 29, with the announcement of the new PM next Monday or Tuesday. I noted that October 3 will be day 14 following the coup, and that it is important that Sonthi and the CDRM hold to their self-imposed two week target to appoint a civilian government. Surayud agreed and believes that they are doing just that. Finally, Surayud asked that if his new position

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does come to pass, he would welcome an early call on him.

COMMENT

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17. (C) Surayud is a well-respected, non-partisan figure with a sterling track record as a professional military officer. After PM Chuan Leekpai selected him to lead the Army in 1998, Surayud undertook a meaningful series of military reforms that served to professionalize and de-politicize the uniformed ranks. During his tenure as Army Chief, Surayud also managed to push back against Burmese incursions into Thai territory, while ending Thai efforts to push Karen refugees over the border. The CDRM has obviously reached out to Surayud because he is one of the few individuals with the credentials and prestige to unite the country in this troubled period. Under the current circumstances, Surayud is arguably the best person to head the interim civilian government. He is trusted by the palace and the military, and enjoys widespread respect across a broad spectrum of Thai citizens because of his integrity and previous service. His appointment would be a very positive development for Thailand internally, as well as for Thai-U.S. relations, and we should welcome it if and when it is announced.

BOYCE